

SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 2020

PENTECOST 3

BE NOT AFRAID

WHEN JESUS CALLED HIS DISCIPLES, THE INVITATION WAS SIMPLE, *"COME, FOLLOW ME, AND I WILL MAKE YOU FISHERS OF PEOPLE."* IT WAS A NEW JOB OPPORTUNITY. JESUS TRAINED THEM TO BE WHAT HE CALLED THEM TO BE – HIS DISCIPLES. THEY SAT AT HIS FEET AND LEARNED, THEY WATCHED HIM PERFORM MIRACLES. THEY BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HE WAS ABOUT. THERE HAD BEEN TIME FOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS.

BUT IN CHAPTER 10 OF HIS ST. MATTHEW'S GOSPEL, SOMETHING CHANGES. THE CLUE LIES AT THE END OF CHAPTER 9. ***"WHEN JESUS SAW THE CROWDS, HE HAD COMPASSION FOR THEM, BECAUSE THEY WERE HARASSED AND HELPLESS, LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD."***

THE DISCIPLES DON'T JUST SIT WITH JESUS AND LEARN FROM HIM. THEY ARE SENT FORTH IN HIS NAME. THEY BECOME PARTNERS IN THE DIVINE WORK OF LIBERATING AND REDEEMING HUMANKIND. BEFORE THEY GO, HE WARNS THEM OF DANGERS AND HARDSHIPS THAT MAY LIE AHEAD. ***"WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?"*** HE SAYS. ***"A DISCIPLE IS NOT GREATER THAN HIS TEACHER. IF THE WORLD GIVES ME A BAD TIME, IT WILL GIVE YOU ONE TOO."***

SO, WHAT DOES JESUS DO? SELL THEM LIFE INSURANCE? GIVE THEM BULLETPROOF VESTS? TEACH THEM HOW TO DIFFUSE CONFLICT? HARDLY. INSTEAD HE SAYS, ***"DON'T EVER BE AFRAID OF YOUR ENEMIES AND CRITICS. EVEN THOUGH IT'S NOT OBVIOUS NOW, THE TRUTH WILL COME OUT FINALLY. SO, SPEAK UP; SHOUT OUT; STAND AND DELIVER"***

OH, MY. WE DON'T WANT TO BE HEROES, ESPECIALLY NOT RELIGIOUS ONES. IT'S ALL WE CAN DO TO WORSHIP ON SUNDAYS, AND WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE SHOUTING THE WORD OF GOD FROM THE HOUSETOPS? NO WAY. BUT JESUS DOESN'T LET UP. ***"STOP BEING AFRAID."*** HE SAYS. YOU WORRY WAY TOO MUCH ABOUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE SAY OR THINK ABOUT YOU AND FAR TOO LITTLE ABOUT WHAT GOD THINKS. SURE, PEOPLE CAN HURT YOU, BUT THE PAIN IS TEMPORARY COMPARED TO ETERNAL LIFE GOD PROMISES.

I WONDER WHAT JESUS MEANT WHEN HE SAID WE SHOULD FEAR GOD. I THINK IT IS NOT FEAR AS IN BEING AFRAID, BUT FEAR AS IN RESPECT AND AWE. WE SHOULD FEAR GOD MORE THAN ANYTHING OR ANYONE... MORE THAN PHYSICAL CRAVINGS OR THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS. DOES OUR OBEDIENCE TO THE LORD FAR EXCEED ALL OTHER ALLEGIANCES?

THE ANSWER COMES WHEN WE FACE OPPOSITION, BECAUSE IT'S THEN THAT WE ARE TEMPTED TO *COMPROMISE OUR CONVICTIONS*. SOMETIMES WE DO IT OUT OF SELF-PRESERVATION. SOMETIMES WE DO IT TO MAINTAIN A SENSE OF HARMONY. BUT JESUS SAYS, "DON'T". ***"DON'T SUPPOSE THAT I'VE COME TO BRING PEACE TO THE EARTH. I HAVE COME, NOT TO BRING PEACE, BUT A SWORD."***

CONVICTIONS ARE WORTH HAVING. AND THEY *WILL* CAUSE DIVISION. ***"I HAVE COME,"*** CHRIST INSISTED, ***"TO SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER . . . AND ONE'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF THEIR OWN HOUSEHOLD."*** IN ST. MATTHEW'S COMMUNITY, THOSE WHO CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY FACED SEVERE PERSECUTION, OFTEN BY MEMBERS OF THEIR OWN FAMILY. IT'S STILL LIKE THAT IN MANY NATIONS AROUND THE WORLD, ESPECIALLY IN MUSLIM COUNTRIES. IF YOU CONFESS FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST THERE, YOU WILL BE DISINHERITED, THROWN OUT, AND SHUNNED BY KIN AND COMMUNITY ALIKE. SOME ARE THROWN IN JAIL AND SOME ARE EVEN KILLED. I READ RECENTLY THAT IN PAKISTAN, MORE CHRISTIANS HAVE DIED ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR FAITH IN THIS CENTURY THAN DURING ALL PREVIOUS CENTURIES COMBINED.

CONVICTIONS WORTH HAVING *WILL* CAUSE DIVISION. IN JESUS DAY, THE PRIMARY WAY PEOPLE THOUGHT OF THEMSELVES WAS AS PART OF A GROUP. THE FATHER OF THE HOUSE MADE ALL THE DECISIONS CONCERNING WHAT FAMILY MEMBERS COULD DO OR NOT DO. NOTHING HAPPENED WITHOUT HIS BLESSING. HIS WORD WAS AUTHORITATIVE AND FINAL. TO BE SEPARATED FROM ONE'S FAMILY WAS TO BE OUTSIDE OF THE PROTECTION THAT THE FAMILY WOULD PROVIDE. FOR THIS REASON, A PERSON WOULD NOT NORMALLY LEAVE HOME. ONLY WITH THE PROTECTION AND PROVISION OF ANOTHER WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE FOR A PERSON TO DO SO. JESUS PROMISES THE DISCIPLES JUST THAT WHEN HE SAYS THAT ***HE WILL ACKNOWLEDGE BEFORE HIS FATHER THOSE WHO ACKNOWLEDGE HIM (AND DENY THOSE WHO DENY HIM)***.

"I HAVE NOT COME TO BRING PEACE, BUT A SWORD," HOW DO WE RECONCILE THIS PASSAGE WITH EARLIER IN MATTHEW (5:9) WHERE JESUS SAYS, ***"BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD."***? AT THE VERY LEAST WE NEED TO AFFIRM BOTH TRUTHS, AS THE SCRIPTURES DO. "WHEN JESUS SAID THAT HE HAD COME TO BRING 'NOT PEACE BUT A SWORD,' HE MEANT THAT THIS WOULD BE THE EFFECT OF HIS COMING, NOT THAT IT WAS THE PURPOSE OF HIS COMING." **THE METAPHOR OF THE SWORD DESCRIBES HOW UNBELIEVERS MAY RESPOND TO THE GOSPEL, NOT HOW WE COMMUNICATE IT! AS CHILDREN OF GOD, OUR PURPOSE IS TO REPRESENT THE PRINCE OF PEACE, REGARDLESS OF THE EFFECT IT HAS.**

JESUS SAYS. FOLLOWING HIM COULD MEAN A BREAK WITH WHAT HAS, UP UNTIL NOW, PROTECTED AND GUIDED THEM. LIVING BY CHRISTIAN CONVICTIONS IS DIFFICULT. THOSE WHO DO SO WILL HAVE TO MAKE DIFFICULT CHOICES.

IN OUR INCREASINGLY SECULAR CULTURE, MANY CHRISTIANS ARE FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN SUNDAY WORSHIP AND EARNING A PAYCHECK, BETWEEN SUNDAY WORSHIP AND THEIR CHILDREN'S SPORTS ACTIVITIES, BETWEEN SUNDAY WORSHIP AND THE SNOOZE BUTTON, BECAUSE AFTER ALL, *"ITS MY ONLY DAY TO SLEEP IN."*

BUT THAT'S THE EASY PART. TODAY, IF YOU'RE OPEN ABOUT YOUR FAITH, IF YOU STAND UP FOR BIBLICAL VALUES, YOU WILL FACE EVERYTHING FROM APATHY TO RIDICULE TO OUTRIGHT HATRED, ESPECIALLY IN THE WORK PLACE.

WHY? BECAUSE AMERICANS VALUE **UNITY** ABOVE CONVICTIONS. EVERYTHING IS DONE TO MAINTAIN PEACE. BUT PEACE AT WHAT PRICE? IS IT A PEACE AT THE PRICE OF MORAL VALUES? PEACE AT THE PRICE OF INTEGRITY OR JUSTICE? IN AN AGE WHERE HAVING CONVICTIONS IS EQUATED TO BEING FANATICAL OR NARROW-MINDED, IT'S NOT EASY TO STAND UP FOR TRUTH. JESUS KNOWS THAT IF WE'RE GOING TO FEAR GOD MORE THAN THE OPINION OF OTHERS, WE'RE GOING TO NEED SUPPORT. WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT HE PROMISES.

"AREN'T TWO SPARROWS SOLD FOR A PENNY? YET NOT ONE OF THEM WILL FALL TO THE GROUND APART FROM YOU FATHER. AND EVEN THE HAIRS OF YOUR HEAD ARE COUNTED. SO DO NOT BE AFRAID; YOU ARE OF MORE VALUE THAN MANY SPARROWS."

IN THIS LIFE WHERE WE ARE DEFINED BY SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBERS, PHONE NUMBERS, ACCOUNT NUMBERS, PIN NUMBERS AND PASSWORDS, THESE WORDS ARE SO COMFORTING.

WHEN WHO WE ARE CAN BE PARED DOWN, CLASSIFIED, CATEGORIZED, AND FILED - THESE WORDS REMIND ME THAT THE ONE WHO CREATED ME VALUES ME BEYOND MY WILDEST IMAGINATION. AND VALUES YOU. AND VALUES *EVERY SINGLE CREATED THING* WITH SUCH INTENSITY, THAT EACH PART OF US, EACH HAIR ON OUR HEAD IS PRECIOUS.

EVENTUALLY, WHEN ALL OF HIS DISCIPLES HAVE LEFT HIM, JESUS STANDS ALONE. HE STANDS ALONE BEFORE THE CHIEF PRIESTS - STANDS ALONE BEFORE PILATE AND HEROD - HANGS ON A CROSS ALONE BEFORE GOD. ONLY ONE WHO TRUSTS THE PROMISES OF HIS FATHER IN HEAVEN CAN DO SUCH A THING. AND GOD COMES THROUGH ON EASTER SUNDAY, FOR JESUS AND FOR US. WE ARE OFFERED A FIRST- HAND GLIMPSE OF THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE AS IT FACES DOWN EVIL AND WINS THE VICTORY OVER DEATH AND HELL. WE ARE OFFERED EVIDENCE THAT JESUS' WAY, HOWEVER DARING AND COUNTER-CULTURAL, IS THE WAY TOWARD LIFE. WE ARE CALLED TO STAND AGAINST THE FORCES THAT THREATEN TO DIMINISH THAT LIFE.

BUT UNLIKE JESUS, WE DON'T EVER REALLY STAND ALONE. WE HAVE HIS PROMISE THAT HE WHO FACED ALL THESE THINGS BEFORE US, NOW FACES THEM *WITH US*. IN WORSHIP, WE GLIMPSE A VISION OF GOD'S KINGDOM WHICH EMBRACES ALL PEOPLE, EVEN RELUCTANT OR HOSTILE FAMILY MEMBERS. IT IS A VISION THAT VALUES EACH PERSON, EVEN THE MOST RESISTANT, OFFERING ENDLESS LOVE AND FORGIVENESS. IT IS A VISION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD, GATHERED WITHOUT DISTINCTION AROUND THE TABLE... A VISION OF LIFE AS IT SHOULD BE, AND WILL BE.

BUT IT'S NOT JUST A VISION FOR SUNDAY. IT'S A VISION THAT WE BEAR TO THE WORLD FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK THAT WE ARE NOT GATHERED HERE. THIS VISION IS COMPELLING ENOUGH TO GIVE ONE'S LIFE FOR. IT'S WHAT THE WORLD CRAVES, AND WHAT ONLY THOSE WHO FOLLOW CHRIST CAN GIVE. THIS VISION INVITES US INTO SOMETHING GREATER THAN OURSELVES, AND SENDS US TO BECOME WHAT GOD HAS CALLED US TO BE: A COMMUNITY TRANSFORMED FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD.

TO THOSE WHO ARE STILL COUNTING THE COST IN TERMS OF CONVICTIONS AND FAMILY

AND REPUTATION AND STATUS AND COMFORT, JESUS REMINDS US THAT ***“THOSE WHO FIND THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT.”***

I HOPE YOU’LL RISK EXPERIENCING THE TRUTH OF THESE WORDS FOR YOURSELF THIS WEEK, KNOWING THAT THERE IS NO NEED TO FEAR, BECAUSE...

GOD OUR FATHER VALUES YOU.
JESUS, OUR SAVIOR, SENDS YOU.
AND THE HOLY SPIRIT (OUR COMFORTER)
GOES BEFORE YOU. AMEN.